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Report hardly draws angry sniff

By Casey Bukro
Chicago Tribune

CAHOKIA, Ill.—A town with a creek known to glow in the dark doesn't get too excited about reports of toxic air pollution.

Dead Creek, an ecological horror story all by itself, slithers for 7 miles through the towns of Sauget and Cahokia in southwestern Illinois, one of the most severely polluted areas of the state.

Both small towns, across the Mississippi River from St. Louis, have a clear view of the Gateway Arch.

They also have air that reeks of chemical and manufacturing odors—scents that even babies come to know as landmarks.

Karen Harper of Cahokia recalls the day she was returning home from the hospital with her newborn son.

"He crinkled his nose and I said, 'Boy, when you smell that, you are close to home.'"

The hot summer winds are redolent of burning rubber, a throat-grabbing sweet scent of cleaning fluid, and the nose-tingling aroma of bleach.

As a result, the announcement last Thursday by Monsanto Chemical Co. that it pumped 3.8 million pounds of toxic chemicals into the air at its Sauget plant during 1987 was met largely with a shrug in the Sauget-Cahokia area.

Companies across the country on Friday reported for the first time their annual total emissions of toxic chemicals into air, land and water to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

About 30,000 companies were expected to report, although industrial groups say there is some confusion over who is covered by the 1986 Community Right-to-Know Act.

Monsanto went public with the information, since the reports are intended to alert communities to toxic chemical hazards from plants in their midst. It insisted that its emissions were within safety limits but said nevertheless that it would spend \$59 million by 1992 to clean up emissions from its 100 plants worldwide.

As a result, communities across the nation are learning—some for the first time—that nearby industrial plants are using one or more of 327 chemicals designated by the EPA as very dangerous.

Many of these plants were not recognized before as potential hazards, such as the one operated by Eastman Kodak Co. in Rochester, N.Y..

Kodak announced last month that it pumps 23.6 million pounds of dangerous chemicals into Rochester's air, and many residents living near a Kodak film manufacturing complex reacted by putting their homes up for sale.

That's not happening in Sauget, population 300, or Cahokia, population about 20,000, where pollution comes as no surprise after almost a century of chemical manufacturing.

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that long—began manifesting strange behavior.

A resident in 1980 reported that his dog rolled in the creek and died the next day of chemical burns.

Cahokia's fire department was called out repeatedly to put out flames or quench smoldering fumes in the creek bed.

The flames and smoke would only spring up again after firefighters left.

At about the same time, Cahokia's fire chief, Hersh Riddle, described the eerie sight of Dead Creek at night: "You'd see a blue glow, like the bottom of a flame on the stove."

The EPA in 1982 erected a fence around part of Dead Creek, near the Monsanto plant, because of the danger of skin burns from coming in contact with the creek.

The fire department says it doesn't get many calls these days because of fires in the creek.

But just when residents of Sauget and Cahokia began thinking all the stories about Dead Creek were just a bad dream, the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency found perfectly good reasons for the horror stories.

Terry Ayers, Dead Creek site manager for the Illinois EPA, said recent studies of the Sauget-Cahokia area found 16 chemical dumping grounds that pose serious environmental and health hazards.

The state agency is hoping the federal government will declare the whole area a candidate for emergency cleanup under the Superfund program, since the creek and the polluted ground water flow into the nearby Mississippi River.

The tests, said Ayers, discovered 25 toxic chemicals in the creek and surrounding areas—including chemical phosphorus, which burns when exposed to air.

"That bears out the burning-dog legend," said Ayers. It would also account for the creek smoldering and bursting into flames, or giving off a blue glow at night.

In some communities, such a finding might trigger outrage.

But in Cahokia, it is cause for an almost perverse pride that is sometimes found in heavily polluted neighborhoods.

"We've lived here 42 years," said Mary Royal of Cahokia. "Never been sick and never been in the hospital. We might not be able to live in a place with clean air. Then I'd probably get sick."

The village of Cahokia calls itself the "Birthplace of the Midwest" because it was founded in 1699 and is considered the state's oldest town.

Cahokia Mounds, site of an ancient Indian civilization and burial grounds, is nearby.

Despite the chemicals, Karen Harper considers Cahokia a pretty good place to live: in a small town, country setting minutes away from jobs in St. Louis.

People adapt.

"I don't see much you can do but keep your kids

